
TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE....

A Column on Consumer Issues

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NIGERIAN LETTER SCAM

Have you received a letter, fax or e-mail asking you to help a Nigerian with a bank transaction – and offering you a chance to share millions of dollars? This scam has been around for decades, but now it seems to have reached epidemic proportions. This office has received numerous calls, faxes, and letters inquiring about a fraudulent advance-fee offer. While some people recognize that this scheme, widely known as the “Nigerian letter scam,” sounds too good to be true, unfortunately some North Dakotans have been victimized by this fraud.

In the Nigerian letter scam, scam artists entice their victims into believing they have been singled out from the masses to share in multi-million dollar windfall profits. Typically, a company or individual receives an unsolicited letter, fax or e-mail from a Nigerian claiming to be a senior civil servant. In the letter, the Nigerian informs the recipient that he is seeking a reputable foreign company or individual into whose account he can deposit funds ranging from \$10 to \$60 million, which the Nigerian government supposedly overpaid on a procurement contract. In return, the recipient gets to keep a share of the millions. This type of scheme is becoming increasingly effective. Such a scam will eventually reach someone who, while skeptical, desperately wants the deal to be genuine.

There are dozens of different variations of this e-mail originating from several countries, all involving a plea for help and a promise to share the riches. It doesn't matter what the story is, every single one is a scam.

These con artists do not target a single company or individual, but rather send out mass mailings, e-mails or faxes. The goal of the schemer is to delude the target into thinking he or she is being included in a very lucrative, although questionable, arrangement. The victim must be confident of the deal's potential for success so he or she will willingly contribute a large amount of money when the deal is threatened. Yes, “when the deal is threatened,” because the con-within-the-con is that the scheme will be threatened to persuade the victim to provide a large sum of money to save the venture.

There are several factors typical of Nigerian advance-fee fraud:

- ✓ An urgent letter from an alleged Nigerian government official offers to transfer millions of dollars in "over-invoiced contract funds" into the victim's bank account.
- ✓ The victim is asked to provide blank company letterhead, bank account information, and telephone and fax numbers.
- ✓ The confidentiality of the transactions is emphasized.

- ✓ Numerous documents with official looking stamps, seals, and logos appear to suggest the authenticity of the proposal.
- ✓ Up-front or advance fees are requested for various taxes, attorney fees, transaction fees, or bribes.
- ✓ Travel to overseas locations is encouraged to complete the transaction.
- ✓ Imposters posing as real occupants or officials may use offices in legitimate government buildings in Nigeria to meet with the potential victims.
- ✓ A problem with the transaction is staged, and the victim is urged to provide a large sum of money to save the venture.

It is easy to fall victim to a scam. Sometimes, it is impossible to tell a legitimate deal from an outright scam, especially if you do not seek outside help. Learn how to avoid the bad deals by educating yourself and following some basic, common sense principles. Always keep your private information private. Do not give your financial account numbers to strangers or companies with which you are not familiar. A scam artist can use this information to steal money from you just as easily as mugging you at gunpoint or in a darkened alley.

Avoid being the next victim – if you receive an offer in the mail or via fax that sounds too good to be true – throw it away! If you get an e-mail offer – delete it – DO NOT RESPOND! More information about the Nigerian Advance-Fee Loan scams is available from the Department of Justice (www.justiceonline.org/consum/nigerian.html), the U.S. Secret Service (www.secretservice.gov/alert419.shtml), and the U.S. Department of State or www.state.gov/www/regions/africa/naffpub.pdf)

The Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division investigates allegations of fraud in the marketplace. Investigators also mediate individual complaints against businesses. If you have a consumer problem or question, call the Consumer Protection Division at 328-3404 (v/TDD) or toll-free at 1-800-472-2600 (v/TDD). This article and other consumer information is located on our website at www.ag.state.nd.us.

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